



Woodland Homes Fire Safety¹

Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Publication
adapted by William J. Becker and Heather Pirozzoli²

Nestling homes into the smallest possible clearing in the woods is a trend growing in popularity in Florida. But, it is a practice that can be extremely dangerous when it comes to protecting a home from wildfire.

The extent of the threat has been clearly demonstrated. Hundreds of homes have been destroyed and thousands of people forced to evacuate as fire after fire has broken out in drought-dried woodlands and grasslands in and around residential areas.

What is the chance of it happening to your home?

Fire departments in Florida, including the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' Division of Forestry, respond to an average of 71 brush and wildfires a day -- 365 days a year. That's more than 26,000 fires per year!

The threat to forested homes is most severe during drought periods, especially following cold weather that has killed tender plants. And, the danger is not only to homes in "deep woods", but also to houses in the rural-urban interface that was once called the suburbs. Precautions are in order anywhere there is a large enough combination of trees and undergrowth to allow a fire to gain momentum.

This document is designed to call attention to building and landscaping practices that can jeopardize a home's safety from fire, to offer some ways to preserve

privacy without sacrificing safety, and to provide tips that a family should know in the event a wildfire threatens its home.

USING LANDSCAPING TO CREATE A FIREBREAK

Good grooming practices go a long way toward making homes safer from woods fires. But, there are three landscaping "sins" that can make a home vulnerable to wildfire regardless of the other precautions taken by the homeowner (see Table 1). Elimination of these same hazards around out-buildings such as barns, greenhouses and sheds, and from around animal cages, pens and corrals, will also make them much safer from woods fires. (see Figure 1).

Grooming practices that all homeowners should routinely exercise include keeping lawns trimmed, leaves raked, the housetop and rain-gutters free of debris such as dead limbs and leaves. Keep firewood stacked away from the house. Also, screens or other barriers should be used to prevent debris from blowing under the house or into the attic, tree limbs should be pruned away from overhead powerlines and the rooftop, and spark arresters should be maintained on all fireplace and woodstove chimneys.

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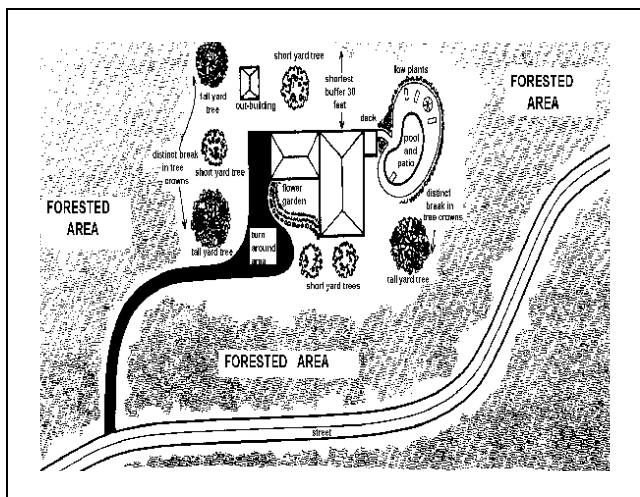


Figure 1. Using landscaping to create a firebreak

Table 1. Landscaping sins and their solutions

SINS	SOLUTIONS
Failure to have a distinct interruption of forest-type vegetation between woodlands and home.	Create a buffer zone of at least 30 feet by replacing forest underbrush (palmettos, shrubs, tall grasses, etc.) with a grass lawn; thinning trees around the house so there is a break between the crowns of yard trees and those in the surrounding forest.
Low to medium-height vegetation growing right next to home.	Locate flowers, hedges, etc., away from the house.
"Stair-stepping" vegetation that would allow a low-burning fire to sweep up increasingly taller bushes and spread into tree tops around the house.	Remove one "step" in the ladder by pruning low tree branches; locating short plants under mature trees; locating medium-height trees away from taller trees.

HOW THE WEATHER AFFECTS FIRE

To a large degree, weather determines fire danger. Remember:

- During prolonged drought tender plants that can be fuel for wildfires die and dry out.
- Cold weather, particularly during drought, speeds the dying and drying process.

- When the woods are dry, thundershowers bring only limited relief. The fuels dry again quickly and fires can occur even the next day.

- Wind also dries fuels, and it causes fires to spread.

- **DO NOT BURN ON WINDY DAYS!!**

KNOW FIRE LAWS BEFORE YOU BURN

You are in violation of state law if you burn landclearing debris, or set fires for agricultural or forestry operations without first obtaining authorization from the Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' Division of Forestry. Some trash fires (leaves, yard litter, household paper) must also be approved in advance. Campfires, warning fires and cooking fires do not require notification.

Landclearing, agricultural/forestry and trash burning must be done between the hours of 9 a.m. and one hour before sunset, and there are setback distances from public road and occupied buildings (see Florida's Trash Burning Laws).

Trash fires are sometimes illegal if pickup service is regularly available. Local laws often forbid them too. When they are legal, burning in a noncombustible container covered by a metal mesh or grill is required. However, trash fires that create a nuisance because of smoke, soot or heat must be extinguished.

Certain materials are always illegal to burn, including tires and other rubber materials, roofing materials, plastic and creosoted lumber.

Call your local Division of Forestry office or fire department (see Florida's Trash Burning Laws) for information concerning local outdoor burning rules. Never light a fire outdoors until you are sure of what is legal. And, always use good judgement concerning the weather and other conditions that can influence a fire. **BE SAFE, NOT SORRY!!**

DON'T GIVE UP SAFETY IN SEARCH OF SECLUSION

In the pursuit of privacy, many homeowners build out of sight of adjacent streets. There is nothing wrong with that, but when emergency equipment is needed, valuable time can be lost looking for you.

Driveways leading to your home should be clearly marked with an address. Driveways should be built so

that firefighting equipment can use them. Eliminate sharp curves and dips, make culverts and bridges wide and strong enough to accommodate heavy equipment, prune low-hanging limbs, and build room for trucks to turn around when they arrive at your home.

Whenever practical, there should be two access routes to forested homes so firefighting equipment can reach the site, and occupants can be evacuated even if one driveway is blocked by fire.

When firemen arrive, it is wise to leave the task of protecting the home to the professionals. A quick briefing about such things such as the location of water supplies, buried utility lines and septic tanks, and any hazardous materials you have stored will be welcomed. But, after the briefing, the biggest assistance you can give the firemen is to retreat to a safe place while they concentrate on protecting your home without having to protect you too.

YOUR EVACUATION PLAN

Everyone living in a wooded area should have an evacuation plan. It should be discussed periodically, and parts of it should even be rehearsed.

An evacuation plan is more than a description of how to get out of the house. A complete plan includes:

- An escape route,
- Family meeting place,
- Instructions for children,
- Steps to make the house as "fireproof" as possible,
- Plans for a fast get-away, and
- Provisions for pets.

Generally, a family forced by wildfire to evacuate will do so together, so the escape route will be the same for all. It is important, however, to establish a meeting place in case all family members are not home when the evacuation takes place.

Children in the family should be given firm instructions that they are to leave the home at the first threat of danger if such an emergency catches them home alone. They should report to the prearranged meeting place, and stay there until they hear from you. Should they encounter a threatening situation as they are

arriving home, their instruction should be not to enter the danger zone, but instead go directly to the meeting place.

Depending on how much time you have before an approaching wildfire could likely reach your vicinity, some things you can do to help "fireproof" your home, ensure a fast get-away, and take care of pets include outdoor and indoor preparation.

Outside the House

Follow these recommendations for "fireproofing" the outside of your home:

- Place combustible items (outdoor furniture, etc.) in the garage, house or barn.
- Seal up attic and ground vents and windows (if storm shutters are not present) with precut plywood to keep out sparks.
- Connect garden hoses to outside taps; equip them with spraygun-type nozzles. Have enough hose to reach any area of the house and nearby out-buildings.
- Turn off fuel supplies by closing the service valve at the tank or meter. Put out all pilot lights.
- Place sprinklers on the roof and near all above ground fuel tanks. DO NOT turn on the water until the fire is near in order to conserve water.
- If you have a portable gasoline-powered pump to take water from swimming pool, tank or pond, make sure is operational and in place.

Inside the House

Following these recommendations will assist in "fireproofing" the inside of your home:

- Close all windows and doors to prevent sparks from blowing inside, and to prevent drafts.
- Open the damper on fireplaces to stabilize inside/outside pressure, but close fireplace screens to keep sparks from igniting the house.
- Turn on a light in each room to make sure the house is visible in heavy smoke.

- Close all venetian blinds and heavy drapes to keep out heat and to provide safety in case heat or wind breaks windows.
- Remove lightweight curtains to prevent them from being ignited by radiated heat.
- Move flammable furniture away from windows and sliding doors to reduce the possibility of ignition.
- Place valuable papers and memorabilia inside the car for quick departure.
- Confine pets to one room so they can be easily located.
- Back the car into the garage and roll up the windows.
- If there is an automatic garage door opener, disconnect it so you can still get the car out of a power failure occurs.
- Close all garage doors and windows.
- Keep your radio tuned to a local station for reports and evacuation information.